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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ASHGABAT 000702

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR,S FAREWELL CALL WITH NIYAZOV

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY AMB TRACEY JACOBSON FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

Summary

¶1. (C) During an hour long farewell call with Ambassador, an apparently healthy and engaged Niyazov:

-described plans for upcoming elections at all levels, starting with village councils July 23 and leading up to presidential elections in 2009;

-noted that he would maintain his chairmanship of the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty) after presidential elections, to ensure "unity;"

-confirmed that he will at some point re-institute a 10th year of primary education, while insisting that further education was pointless;

-criticized the "sneaky" Russians both for involvement in the 2002 coup attempt and underhanded deals with Ukraine to continue to get Turkmenistani gas cheap;

-insisted that he would stand firm on his decision not to sell gas for less than \$100/tcm, which he believes the Russians will eventually pay "once the weather starts to turn cold in October."

¶2. (C) Despite the inevitable "classic Bash" moments (including a knee-jerk reaction at the mention of NGOs, and a cringe-inducing dissertation on the foreign minister's previous marital woes and drinking habits), Niyazov clearly intended to have a positive farewell call. Although his introductory comments on the need for democratic reform could have been lifted from embassy talking points, it's clear that he intends to keep his hand firmly on the tiller, and stifle any attempts to expand civil society or real freedom of expression. End Summary.

Happy Independence Day

¶3. (C) Niyazov, demonstrating his penchant for meetings during holidays, invited Ambassador (accompanied by Pol/Mil Chief as notetaker) for a farewell call July 4. He opened the meeting by expressing full support for Ambassador's published July 4 message (which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had asked the embassy to change to make "less insulting" the day before, septel). He expressed his desire

for good relations with "your great nation," thanking Ambassador for her efforts to improve the bilateral relationship following the 2002 coup attempt, which he said Russia had supported.

Our Lack of Democracy is the Soviet Union's Fault

¶4. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's statement that the United States established its democracy 230 years ago and was constantly striving to develop it, President Niyazov said that he had a high appreciation for democratic institutions. (Note: We've yet to see it here.) As the new century continues he is trying to establish democratic institutions in Turkmenistan, but the Turkmen people themselves have little understanding of democratic development due to their history -- a new mentality has to be developed before such institutions could take root. He blamed this undemocratic mentality on Turkmenistan's Soviet past; the Soviet Union saw Turkmenistan only as a place to exploit mineral resources without developing its human capital. Describing his own experiences as an apparatchik in Moscow, he said that in 1985 the Chairman of the Soviet Cabinet of Ministers Tikhanov had called him into his office and asked him where Turkmenistan was located and what they did there. In Niyazov's words, Soviet authorities never let the Turkmen decide any of their own economic or social questions, sent in &foreign8, i.e. Ukrainian, workers to run their gas and oil fields, and made the republic's budget dependent on the decisions of the Central Bank in Moscow. Even under Gorbachev he claimed that Turkmen only received 10 percent of the income from their oil and gas from Moscow and half of this was distributed as

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"useless" consumer goods. Therefore, according to Niyazov, this system led to the creation of a silent population, which was the main legacy of the Soviet Union in Turkmenistan.

¶5. (C) Several times during his exegesis Niyazov blamed Turkmenistan's lack of democracy not only on its Soviet legacy but on a Soviet &Old Guard8 he claimed he had to root out and which he implied stymied his efforts to change the country. In one instance he mentioned that Turkmenistan's new generation graduating from its universities would be ready to run the country's gas and oil infrastructure, become entrepreneurs, etc., but that this &Old Guard8 still existed and would make life difficult for them. Speaking later about his (constant) removal of hakims (governors) and other officials, Niyazov said they were members of this &Old Guard8 who were invariably corrupt.

Upcoming Elections

¶6. (C) Ambassador queried Niyazov on plans for elections, asking specifically whether the electoral system would allow multiple candidates and candidates from different ethnic groups. Niyazov answered positively saying that the schedule for elections would remain as announced with village-level council (gengeshi) elections in July, regional (welayet) council elections in October 2006, welayet hakim (governor) secret-ballot elections in October 2007, then parliamentary

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elections, and finally presidential elections in 2009. Responding to another question, Niyazov claimed that he would not bother with the local elections and that the electoral commission and parliament would supervise these; further, he was not interested in the work of village councils anymore and no one from the center would interfere. Niyazov spoke positively about the current parliament saying that it was made up of mostly new persons and that few of them had Soviet mindsets. Ambassador asked if elected governors would still be subject to dismissal by the President. Niyazov clearly

stated that this would no longer happen; the electors would then take care of removing governors if they did not perform well.

Political Parties Will Not be Artificial

17. (C) Niyazov described how his programs had been designed to provide rural citizens with the capital to have their own cattle, goats, sheep, cars, farm implements, free gas, free water, etc., and allow them to increase their wealth. Mentioning how Turkmen trading entrepreneurs filled flights to India, Dubai, and London, Niyazov said his main economic goal was to create a domestic market which would increase wealth throughout the country and create a class of entrepreneurs, small businessmen, traders, minor industrialists, and the like. This, in his opinion, would be the part of society that would create and fund political parties. Niyazov decried the &intellectual8 approach towards democratization that he said took place in Russia. He said that in Russia the intelligentsia had rushed towards democratization with the French Revolution's rally cry of "liberte, egalite, fraternite..." but they were disappointed. This approach had instead produced the oligarchs of the 1990s who got into parliament and made laws to protect themselves. Niyazov stated that Turkmenistan would develop democracy more slowly and methodically. Per the ambassador's questions as to how presidential candidates would be nominated, Niyazov responded that there were a couple of variants. One variant was for would-be candidates to gather 100,000 signatures. However the People's Council will have the final approval over candidates, and will select between two and five candidates to campaign. The party list process was another variant, but Turkmenistan had only been independent for 15 years and was not mature enough for this sort of system.

Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain

18. (C) Ambassador asked whether Niyazov would remain Chairman of the People's Council after the presidential elections in 2009. Niyazov gave an immediate and unqualified &yes8 to the question and then launched into a soliloquy about the negative aspects of Soviet succession struggles. Each Soviet

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leader denigrated and denounced the identity ("lichnost") of his predecessor. Niyazov said that this was not good for a transition of power or for society, and so he would stay on to ensure an honest government and "unity" for the transition period (i.e., &hands off my lichnost8). Further, in order to prevent ethnic or inter-tribal strife, he was working hard to increase national identity such as the study of ancient Turkmen history. &I cannot control the whole process,8 said Niyazov, &but I can at least build a healthy environment.8 Niyazov also volunteered that he knew that many persons in Turkmenistan praised him, maybe excessively. Then reflecting for a second he noted that he had done a lot for the country so, &Spasebo.8

Education: What is it Good For?

19. (C) Moving to education, Ambassador asked Niyazov if he would honor the pledge made to DAS Laura Kennedy 18 months ago that in two years Turkmenistan would increase its compulsory level of education from nine to 10 years. Niyazov nodded yes and said that nine years of compulsory education had only been a temporary decision. However he immediately decried the Soviet educational system saying that 12 years of compulsory education was a waste of time and much higher education was even more of a waste. Harking back to the days at his alma mater in Leningrad, he recounted how he had

studied for six years there only to not have the faintest idea of how things were produced or how to work in a power station. He learned more in six months on the job than during his six years in the university. The Turkmen were satisfied with their current educational system and they made sure that schools of higher education did not have superfluous subjects. Ambassador noted that while practical experience was useful, another purpose of higher education was to provide a person with the intellectual capacity to reason and solve problems. At this Niyazov waved his hand and signaled that the conversation should move on.

Gas Negotiations and the Crafty Russians

¶10. (C) Niyazov used the Russian word &khitri8 (crafty or sly) at least a dozen times to describe Russia's negotiation strategy with Turkmenistan over natural gas or to describe Russian President Vladimir Putin himself. He acknowledged that Turkmenistan was at fault for making the mistake long ago of not getting a transit agreement for its natural gas from the Russians. Then after describing the past year's gas negotiations with the Russians (septels), he offered his bottom line - Turkmenistan demanded and expected to get U.S. \$100/tcm of natural gas from Russia. While Niyazov acknowledged that Russia had yet to agree, he credited this to the fact that it was still summer; come fall with lowering temperatures, he said, they will come around. Niyazov said if Turkmenistan receives \$100/tcm from Russia, it will demand the same from Iran in 2007. When Ambassador asked what he would do with his gas if he stopped selling to Russia, Niyazov responded "the Chinese will buy it." (Note: the Chinese pipeline, theoretically planned for 2009, faces many obstacles, including lack of information on reserves and lack of approval from transit countries for its route. End Note.)

Security Cooperation and the War on Drugs

¶11. (C) Ambassador reviewed other facets of U.S.) Turkmen relations from her tour and thanked Niyazov for his support on the Proliferation Security Initiative, the U.S. Air Force Gas-and-Go operation at Ashgabat Airport, and cooperation against the spread of narcotics. She noted that the United States was ready to do even more with Turkmenistan and that the next step regarding narcotics was to work on decreasing demand amongst the youth; the embassy is ready to assist with various programs to this end. Niyazov thanked the Ambassador for her efforts in these fields but noted that although drug use sometimes took place in Turkmenistan, its youth mostly avoided drugs (Note: not from what we've seen). He then said that Turkmenistan was openly fighting the war on drugs and used a recent staged narcotics burn as one example of their efforts. Niyazov also used this topic to again castigate Russia for double-dealing, saying that

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approximately three years ago its special services had learned of a large shipment of Afghan heroin and opium that would transit Turkmenistan for Russia. The Turkmen informed the Russian special services who asked that the shipment be allowed to go through so that they could arrest the distributors on their end. According to Niyazov this did not happen, and the drugs wound up in Europe. Referring to the Ambassador's upcoming posting in Tajikistan, Niyazov said that she would see this more often as the Russians were heavily involved in the drug trade there.

Knee-jerking on NGOs

¶12. (C) Ambassador noted that bilateral relations could not just be restricted to security affairs and mentioned several

embassy education programs, including PEAKS (which was never approved) and the recently-concluded international conference for English teachers (which was not without its challenges, septel). Ambassador expressed disappointment that in the past year not one independent NGO had been registered in Turkmenistan and that registration was extremely difficult. She specifically asked as a personal favor to her and as a farewell gift that President Niyazov authorize the registration of the U.S. Exchange Alumni Association.

Niyazov initially said, "Let (Foreign Minister) Meredov take care of it," but then warned the Ambassador not to create any organizations that "paid people to take to the streets and disrupt public order." Ambassador responded that the U.S. Government never engaged in such matters and that the Alumni Association was not a dangerous group. She emphasized that U.S. Embassy Ashgabat assistance to NGOs and other associations was limited to training and small grants to help local people solve their problems together with local authorities.

¶13. (C) Ambassador concluded with a request that the government of Turkmenistan work cooperatively with the Charge d'Affaires and her eventual successor. She also mentioned that former Ambassador to Turkmenistan and current PDAS Steven Mann would be in country next week and hoped to see Niyazov on July 17. Niyazov demurred, citing an upcoming weeklong trip he planned to make to the Caspian Sea and the demands of the upcoming Wheat Holiday to mark the completion of the harvest. After a brief discussion on her upcoming assignment to Tajikistan, during which Niyazov characterized the Tajiks as uneducated peasants, Ambassador returned to the theme of Independence Day, stating that our nation had learned that the only path to long term stability was to build a democratic process.

Atmospherics

¶14. (C) As usual, Foreign Minister Meredov sat dutifully to Niyazov's right and took copious notes during the meeting. Despite the wide range of topics being discussed, Niyazov found time to cheerfully insult his foreign minister and discuss his personal affairs. Niyazov joked about Meredov's divorce and how three years ago he forbid him to touch alcohol because whenever he drank his nose turned red and his speech became slurred. Niyazov went on to claim that Meredov's father was a closet drinker. Finally, he noted that during Soviet times, the KGB had recruited Meredov and former, now imprisoned, Foreign Ministers Batyr Berdiev and Boris Shikhmuradov when they had studied at the university in Moscow. Niyazov then mumbled that, &this sort of thing did not happen at my polytechnic in Leningrad.⁸ Meredov took the remarks with a smile and an occasional nod of the head.

¶15. (C) Niyazov appeared to be in good health with no mobility or flexibility problems when he moved. He showed no signs of pain or fatigue; his complexion was fair and his eyes clear. When he spoke it was with a firm and unwavering voice and he made cogent, rational (for him) arguments even if they were often bald-faced lies (e.g., drug use isn't a problem in Turkmenistan.) He offered long soliloquies during the meeting, usually to attack the Russians or their Soviet predecessors, but these still were relatively focused and not the rambling remarks we sometimes hear.

Comment

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¶16. (C) Despite his constant attacks against the former Soviet Union and the Soviet legacies in Turkmenistan, Niyazov's mindset remains that of a classic Homo Sovieticus, and as was said of the Bourbons after the Congress of Vienna,

he has neither learned anything nor forgotten anything. Clearly wanting to establish a positive tone from the outset, Niyazov mouthed niceties about democratic procedures and institutions on the American Day of Independence, but simultaneously made it clear he has no intention of releasing the reins of power. We expect that our efforts to promote democratic and economic reform will remain enormously challenging, but as the last three years have made clear, persistent and patient engagement can produce some short-term success stories, while simultaneously keeping the door open for the exchange programs and civil society support necessary for longer-term stability and prosperity.

JACOBSON